

PUBLICITY MATTERS

Press/Public Relations

APPROVAL/TRANSMITTAL

This section contains OIG policy and procedures for handling news media and public requests for information about OIG matters, for initiating and processing press releases about OIG activities, and for gathering news items of interest to OIG. This supersedes IG-1431, dated September 6, 1996. Remove and destroy previous editions.

/s/

ROGER C. VIADERO
Inspector General

A. BACKGROUND

Media Contacts and Press Releases. As stated in Departmental Regulation 1440-2, it is the policy of USDA to cooperate with media representatives when at all possible. USDA's Office of Communications has overall responsibility within USDA for responding to the media; however, individual agencies, such as OIG, may independently work directly with the media on inquiries.

Press releases may be initiated in OIG and must be submitted to the OIG Information Management Division (IMD), Policy Development and Resources Management (PD&RM), for routing through the Office of Communications.

B. POLICY

OIG personnel who review privileged and sensitive information during the course of performing his/her duties have a special obligation to protect this information from unauthorized or premature disclosure.

In responding to requests for information, OIG shall cooperate with news media representatives and the public to the extent that disclosure of information is in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), Privacy Act (PA) and all other applicable laws.

OIG personnel are not to release any information to the press or the public which would interfere with program administration, damage the reputation of an innocent person, expose a

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(B)

source of confidential information, interfere with an ongoing investigation or audit, or jeopardize administrative or legal action.

OIG employees shall not initiate news media contacts unless specifically instructed by management to do so. In those instances, the D/IMD must be immediately advised before or after contact is initiated.

Any OIG employee who recognizes the need to inform the public about some aspect of OIG work may propose and, when practicable, draft a press release for OIG management consideration. All press releases proposed or prepared by OIG employees shall be routed promptly through supervisory channels and to D/IMD for final approval by the IG. IMD will coordinate release with the Office of Communications. OIG employees participating in the preparation of press releases or portions of press releases at the request of a U.S. attorney shall inform the appropriate RIG, SAC, and DD of the content and expected time of the release. The RIG, SAC, or DD will then advise the AIG, Deputy IG, and IG.

C. PROCEDURES

1. IG

- a. Is OIG's official spokesperson.
- b. Maintains overall responsibility for the handling of requests from news media representatives and the public for information about OIG matters.
- c. Approves all OIG press releases.
- d. Authorizes press interviews with OIG employees when it is determined that such interviews will be in the best interest of OIG, the Department, and the public.

2. AIG/PD&RM

- a. Responds to inquiries from news media representatives and the public for information about OIG matters. This function has been delegated to the D/IMD.

(1) Before furnishing information on open OIG audits, evaluations, or investigations, obtains verbal clearance from the IG, Deputy IG, and/or the AIG/A or AIG/I, as appropriate, and ensures that release of information is in compliance with FOIA and PA.

(C2a)

(2) When an audit or investigative report has been issued to a USDA agency for evaluation and possible action, obtains status information from the agency and furnishes it to the requester, if appropriate; or, refers the requester to the USDA agency for information.

(3) When issues developed in an OIG audit, evaluation, or investigation have been referred to a U.S. attorney, coordinates with the SAC and AIG/I to clear information releases with the U.S. attorney or obtain clearance to refer the requester to the U.S. attorney for additional information.

b. Keeps the IG and other interested OIG officials informed of significant news media interest in OIG/USDA matters.

c. Advises OIG officials on the proper handling of news media and public requests for information.

d. Maintains a file (1430) on all OIG press releases.

3. AIG/A, AIG/I, RIG, SAC, and DD

a. Refers all requests from news media representatives, or the public for OIG records to the D/IMD, except as otherwise provided under steps C3b through f that follow.

b. May acknowledge that an OIG audit or investigation is scheduled, ongoing, or completed, unless such an acknowledgment might impede an ongoing matter. Where a response might impede a matter, refers the requester to D/IMD. If charges of improper action by OIG or USDA are involved, refers the caller to D/IMD.

c. May furnish or acknowledge public information concerning indictments, arrests, convictions, or sentences under routine use number 13. Routine use number 13 states: "Relevant information from a system of records may be disclosed to the news media and general public where there exists a legitimate public interest, e.g., to assist in the location of fugitives, to provide notification of arrests, where necessary for protection from imminent threat of life or property, or in accordance with guidelines set out by the Department of Justice in 28 CFR 50.2" (5 U.S.C. § 552a). Detailed information concerning allegations or findings on open or closed audits or investigations will not be discussed without the concurrence of the Inspector General or Deputy Inspector General.

(C3)

d. May authorize a subordinate employee to attend a press conference or briefing concerning an OIG audit or investigation. Expediently advises the IG, the Deputy Inspector General, and the AIG/PD&RM through supervisory channels of press releases or news conferences conducted by other law enforcement entities.

e. Initiates press releases as necessary. If the press release is of interest to a U.S. attorney, obtains his/her concurrence and submits it through supervisory channels to the D/IMD for coordination and IG approval.

f. Screens all press releases proposed by subordinates and forwards those that merit consideration along with a recommendation for approval to D/IMD. Returns others to originators with an explanation of nonacceptance.

4. D/IMD. Upon delegation from the AIG/PD&RM:

a. Reviews the following newspapers for news items of interest to OIG:

The Washington Post
The New York Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Washington Times
USA Today

Promptly informs the IG and other OIG officials of any items noted in the above review and of any items furnished by other OIG sources.

b. Retains the original clipping (or best copy available) for daily review in room 9E, if OIG is mentioned directly or indirectly.

c. Provides guidance on preparation of press releases.

IMD is responsible for collecting news media information, particularly those items critical of, or potentially adverse to, Department operations and programs. IMD will coordinate the information collection and direct it to the IG and others for appropriate action.

(C)

5. Auditor/Special Agent

a. Complies with any request from a U.S. attorney to draft a press release on work completed by OIG personnel. Where appropriate, mentions OIG or the IG in the press release. (The phrase "USDA auditor (investigator)" does not sufficiently identify OIG personnel.)

b. Clears a draft press release, prepared at the request of a U.S. attorney, through the RIG, SAC, or DD where U.S. attorney policy and time constraints permit. Following applicable U.S. attorney procedures, promptly sends the finalized U.S. attorney press release to the AIG/I or AIG/A, and AIG/PD&RM.

6. All Employees

OIG employees should be alert for published information about USDA matters which are of interest to OIG--directly or indirectly—and should send the information to IMD by fax.

Regional personnel should review local newspapers and forward local press coverage to IMD. Local newspapers (through articles, editorials, letters to the editor, and columns) can alert OIG to potentially explosive or embarrassing situations and can draw attention to matters that require corrective action.

a. Upon receiving an inquiry from a news media representative or the public:

(1) Informs the requester that the AIG/PD&RM is responsible for the release of information about OIG matters;

(2) refers the person to the office of the D/IMD, or promptly informs the D/IMD by telephone of the nature of the inquiry so the D/IMD or a staff member can return the requester's call; and

(3) notifies the supervisor of the contact.

b. Does not grant a press interview or provide information to the news media, except as authorized under this directive.

c. Prepares notes of conversation for each news media contact where information is furnished (beyond that in section C6a, above); provides a copy of the notes to the supervisor and the D/IMD.

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(C6)

d. Submits all proposals for a press interview through supervisory channels and the D/IMD (for clearance) to the IG or the Deputy IG (for approval).

e. Is alert to nonroutine local newspaper items and other news material of interest to USDA. If item is sensitive, clips, identifies (date and source and related case number), and promptly faxes the news item to IMD at (202) 690-6305.

(1) If a facsimile is not available and the matter is urgent, notify IMD as soon as possible on (202) 720-6915. Informs the supervisor of the news item and the fact that IMD has been notified.

(2) Mail a confirmation copy of the news item to IMD:

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of Inspector General
Director, IMD
Room 9E, Jamie L. Whitten Federal Bldg.
Stop 2309
1400 Independence Avenue SW.
Washington, D.C. 20250-2309

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